



Crime and the Indian Paradox: A Study of Social Inequality and Narrative Justice in Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects*

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Abstract— This research paper examines Vikas Swarup's second novel, *Six Suspects* (2008), as a sophisticated work of crime fiction that transcends generic boundaries to offer a penetrating critique of contemporary Indian society. Building on the success of his debut *Q & A*, Swarup employs a murder mystery framework to explore the deep-seated inequalities, systemic corruption, and social contradictions that define modern India. Through its multi-narrative structure—presenting the lives of six disparate individuals connected to a high-profile murder—the novel exposes how justice is contingent upon social position, how the elite operate with impunity, and how the marginalized are systematically criminalized. This analysis examines the novel's formal innovations, its critique of institutional power, its representation of India's social spectrum, and its interrogation of the very concept of justice in a stratified society. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from postcolonial studies and the sociology of literature, the paper argues that *Six Suspects* represents a significant intervention in Indian English fiction, using the conventions of crime fiction to stage a comprehensive examination of the nation's post-millennial condition.



Keywords— Vikas Swarup, *Six Suspects*, Indian English fiction, crime fiction, social inequality, postcolonial literature, narrative justice, corruption

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 From *Q & A* to *Six Suspects*

Vikas Swarup's debut novel *Q & A* (2005) achieved extraordinary international success, both as a literary work and as the source material for the Academy Award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). The novel's protagonist, Ram Mohammad Thomas, offered readers a picaresque journey through the underbelly of Indian society, using the framing device of a quiz show to unlock episodes of suffering, survival, and eventual triumph. When Swarup published his follow-up, *Six Suspects*, in 2008, expectations were inevitably high, and the novel undertook a more ambitious narrative experiment.

Where *Q & A* focused on a single protagonist's linear journey, *Six Suspects* adopts a multi-narrative structure, presenting the interlocking stories of six individuals implicated in the murder of Vivek "Vicky" Rai, a wealthy and notoriously corrupt playboy. As Swarup himself noted

in an interview, the difficulty of this approach stemmed from having to "write about the interior lives of six different characters," which required experimentation with "voice, with technique" while maintaining narrative coherence. The result is a novel that uses the conventions of crime fiction to construct what one reviewer called "a teeming, beguiling Indian panorama".

1.2 The Novel's Central Premise

The plot of *Six Suspects* is anchored by a single, shocking event: the murder of Vicky Rai at a celebratory party held immediately after his acquittal for the murder of a young woman, Ruby Gill. Rai, the son of Jagannath Rai, the powerful Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh, has a long history of criminal behavior—running over pavement dwellers with his BMW, poaching endangered wildlife—for which his father's influence has ensured he never faced consequences. His acquittal for Ruby's murder represents

yet another instance of wealth and power triumphing over justice.

The party celebrating this acquittal ends abruptly when Vicky is shot dead. The Delhi police identify six suspects, each with a compelling motive: Mohan Kumar, a corrupt bureaucrat; Shabnam Saxena, a Bollywood actress whom Vicky had been pursuing; Larry Page (Rick Myers in some accounts), an American tourist and adult film producer; Munna Mobile, a cell phone thief from the slums; Eketi Onge, a member of a vanishing tribal community from the Andaman Islands; and Jagannath Rai himself, Vicky's father. The novel unfolds through the intertwined narratives of these six characters, with their stories mediated through the columns of journalist Arun Advani.

1.3 Critical Framework

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on postcolonial theory, the sociology of literature, and narratology to examine *Six Suspects* as both a literary artifact and a social document. Following scholars such as Lucien Goldmann and Terry Eagleton, literature is understood here as a cultural production that simultaneously reflects, interrogates, and potentially shapes social reality. The crime fiction genre, often dismissed as merely popular entertainment, is examined for its capacity to stage meaningful social critique.

Recent scholarship on *Six Suspects* has emphasized its treatment of the intersection between crime and social inequality. As Hemavathy and Senthamarai observe, the novel "explores how crime is entangled with societal structures, emphasising that the elite can protect themselves while the underprivileged are criminalised". This paper extends this analysis, examining how the novel's formal innovations—its multi-narrative structure, its postponement of generic conventions, its experimental use of voice—enable its social critique.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CRIME FICTION AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE

2.1 The Genre as Vehicle for Social Commentary

Crime fiction has historically been understood as a conservative genre, one that typically reaffirms social order by identifying and punishing the transgressor. The classic detective story, from Conan Doyle to Christie, concludes with the restoration of order, the reassurance that justice ultimately prevails. However, as Somali Saren argues, the genre is "not inherently a conservative genre but fluid in nature as evident from the constant revision it has gone through"

Swarup's novel participates in this revisionist tradition. By withholding resolution until the final pages, by distributing

narrative attention across multiple characters rather than focusing on a single detective, and by implicating the entire social structure in the crime, *Six Suspects* transforms the murder mystery into something more ambitious: an examination of systemic injustice rather than individual transgression. As Tanvi Patel notes in her dissertation on South Asian crime fiction, Swarup's novel displays "postponement of traditional crime fiction genre conventions in order to spotlight social problems emerging from rampant self-interest and social malaise of the time".

2.2 The Polyphonic Novel and Social Representation

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the polyphonic novel—a work in which multiple consciousnesses coexist without being subordinated to a single authorial voice—provides a useful framework for understanding *Six Suspects*. The novel does not privilege any single character's perspective but presents six distinct worldviews, each shaped by different social positions, each with its own language and understanding of reality.

This polyphonic structure enables Swarup to represent the full spectrum of Indian society, from the stone-age tribesman to the Bollywood star, from the American tourist to the slum-dweller. As Swarup explained, he sought to give "readers a glimpse of modern India through six different eyes," requiring "a diverse range of characters covering a wide social spectrum". The novel thus becomes a kind of literary sociology, mapping the social terrain of contemporary India through the consciousness of those who inhabit its various regions.

2.3 Crime, Class, and Criminalization

A central concern of the novel is the relationship between class position and criminal status. The murder investigation treats the six suspects differently not based on evidence but based on their social standing. The elite suspects—Mohan Kumar, Shabnam Saxena, Jagannath Rai—are presumed innocent and accorded dignity and due process. The marginalized suspects—Munna Mobile, Eketi Onge—are presumed guilty, their very existence interpreted as evidence of criminality.

This differential treatment reflects what the novel presents as a fundamental feature of Indian society: the criminalization of poverty and the immunization of wealth. Vicky Rai, despite having committed multiple crimes—including murder—walks free because of his father's political power. Munna Mobile, whose crime is stealing mobile phones to survive, is treated as inherently suspect. The novel thus exposes what Hemavathy and Senthamarai term "the intersection of crime and social inequality," revealing how "the elite can protect themselves while the underprivileged are criminalised".

III. THE SIX SUSPECTS: A SOCIAL SPECTRUM

3.1 Vicky Rai: The Anti-Hero and Symbol of Elite Impunity

Though Vicky Rai is dead before the novel's central action begins, his presence haunts every page. He functions as what one critic terms an "anti-hero"—a figure whose lack of "fine qualities" and whose "criminal tendency" nevertheless commands narrative attention. Vicky embodies everything wrong with India's power structure: inherited privilege, casual cruelty, and absolute impunity.

The novel grounds Vicky's story in real-world events. The character is loosely based on the 1999 murder of model Jessica Lal, a high-profile case that exposed the corruption of India's legal system. By fictionalizing this event, Swarup transforms individual tragedy into systemic critique. Vicky is not merely a bad individual but a product of a system that protects the powerful regardless of their actions.

His father, Jagannath Rai, represents the political machinery that enables such impunity. As Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh, he has unlimited resources to manipulate the legal system, buy witnesses, and delay proceedings. The novel's depiction of his machinations—his strategic use of communal tensions for electoral advantage, his casual corruption, his absolute amorality—offers a devastating portrait of Indian politics at its most cynical.

3.2 Mohan Kumar: The Bureaucrat and the Ghost of Gandhi

Mohan Kumar, a retired bureaucrat, represents the complicity of the administrative class in systemic corruption. His story takes an unusual turn when he becomes possessed by what appears to be the ghost of Mahatma Gandhi during a seance. The ghost, despite its pacifist principles, seeks to avenge Ruby Gill's murder.

This supernatural element might seem incongruous in a crime novel, but it serves several functions. It allows Swarup to stage dialogues between Gandhi's philosophy and contemporary Indian reality, exposing how far the nation has departed from its founding ideals. It also provides a moral compass within a narrative otherwise populated by compromised characters. However, as some critics note, these "tracts are intolerably monotonous and predictable," representing perhaps the novel's weakest element.

3.3 Shabnam Saxena: Bollywood and the Politics of Image

Shabnam Saxena, a Bollywood actress, represents the glamour industry and its relationship to power. Vicky Rai had been pursuing her aggressively, and she thus has a

motive for his murder. Her story, told through diary entries, reveals the vulnerability beneath the glamorous surface.

Swarup's treatment of Shabnam evolved during the writing process. Initially conceived as "a vain, flippant celebrity who couldn't see below the surface," she surprised the author "with her erudition and emotional depth," becoming by the end a character toward whom "the reader has started feeling sympathetic." This character development reflects the novel's broader refusal to reduce individuals to types; even the Bollywood star, seemingly the most superficial of characters, reveals unexpected complexity.

Her story also explores the theme of doubling and identity, as she grooms a destitute young woman to serve as her professional double—a plot development one reviewer compared to "All About Eve with a vengeance." This doubling motif raises questions about authenticity, performance, and the construction of identity in a mediated world.

3.4 Larry Page: The American in India

Larry Page, an American tourist and adult film producer, represents the foreign gaze on India. He arrives seeking a mail-order bride, only to discover that the woman he's been corresponding with is actually a Bollywood star who has been deceived by others. Fleeced and humiliated, he remains in India, gradually developing genuine affection for the country.

As the AV Club review notes, Larry "often seems like Swarup leaning on the satire button too heavily," embodying "ugly Americanism" in somewhat caricatured form. Yet his character arc—from exploitative tourist to genuine lover of India—allows Swarup to explore how even the most superficial engagement with the country can transform into something deeper. Larry's story also enables satire of American ignorance and entitlement, balancing the novel's critique of Indian institutions with some self-deprecating humor.

3.5 Munna Mobile: The Slum-Dweller's Journey

Munna Mobile, a cell phone thief from the slums, is the character most reminiscent of Ram Mohammad Thomas from *Q & A*. His story follows a similar trajectory: rags, survival, impossible love, and the pressure of circumstances beyond his control. Munna represents the millions of India's urban poor who survive through informal economies, always vulnerable to criminalization.

His nickname "Mobile" derives from his profession: stealing mobile phones and selling them. This profession places him at the intersection of India's technological modernity and its persistent poverty. He participates in the cell phone revolution that has transformed India, but only at its margins, as a predator rather than a consumer. His story

illustrates how the benefits of economic growth are distributed unevenly, how the poor access modernity only through illegality.

3.6 Eketi Onge: The Tribesman in the Modern World

Eketi Onge, a member of a vanishing tribal community from the Andaman Islands, represents perhaps the novel's most original creation. Swarup's inspiration came from reading about how "during the 2004 tsunami the primitive tribes of the Andaman had remained safe using their powers of medicine and magic". This report sparked his interest in "the interplay between two totally diverse cultures; what would happen when a primitive tribesman is confronted by the glittering lights of the modern world."

Eketi's story follows his journey from his island home to the Indian mainland in pursuit of a sacred stone stolen from his people. Along the way, he is "by turns befriended and exploited by a series of heartless manipulators". His innocence and dignity contrast sharply with the corruption and cynicism he encounters, making him perhaps the novel's most sympathetic figure. Swarup himself identifies Eketi as his favorite character, noting the difficulty of "get[ting] under the skin of the character" and understanding "how a stone-age tribesman behaves, what he thinks".

Eketi's presence in the novel serves multiple functions. It extends the novel's social spectrum beyond the usual boundaries of Indian English fiction, which rarely represents tribal communities. It provides a perspective from which modern Indian society appears alien and often monstrous. And it raises questions about development, progress, and the costs of modernity—questions that the novel refuses to answer simply.

IV. THE CRITIQUE OF INSTITUTIONAL POWER

4.1 The Legal System: Justice as Commodity

The novel's most sustained critique targets India's legal system, which emerges not as a mechanism for justice but as a commodity available to the highest bidder. Vicky Rai's acquittal for Ruby Gill's murder—despite overwhelming evidence of his guilt—demonstrates how wealth and influence can purchase legal outcomes. His father's ability to manipulate the system—buying witnesses, delaying proceedings, pressuring judges—reveals corruption at the highest levels.

The differential treatment of the six suspects during the murder investigation extends this critique. The elite suspects are questioned politely and released; the marginalized suspects are presumed guilty and treated accordingly. Justice, the novel suggests, is not blind but keenly attentive to social status.

4.2 The Political Class: Cynicism and Strategy

Jagannath Rai embodies the cynicism of India's political class. His primary concern is not justice for his son's victim—or even for his son—but the preservation and expansion of his power. He manipulates communal tensions for electoral advantage, recognizing that religious conflict can be mobilized for political gain. As the novel notes, he moves to ban films and stir sentiment strategically, calculating which communities can be courted through which gestures.

This depiction aligns with scholarly analyses of communalism as a modern political phenomenon rather than an ancient religious conflict. Rai's cynical manipulation of religious identity reveals how communal violence serves political interests, not the other way around.

4.3 The Media: Sensation and Complicity

The novel also critiques the media's role in shaping public perception of crime and justice. Journalist Arun Advani, whose columns frame the narrative, represents the possibility of responsible journalism, but he is surrounded by media figures more interested in sensation than truth. The coverage of Vicky Rai's murder—the speculation, the leaks, the manufactured controversies—illustrates how media institutions contribute to the confusion and injustice they purport to expose.

V. NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE AND FORMAL INNOVATION

5.1 The Multi-Narrative Structure

The novel's most distinctive formal feature is its multi-narrative structure. Each suspect's story unfolds in its own section, with its own voice and style. Mohan Kumar's sections mix bureaucratic language with spiritual revelation; Shabnam's sections take the form of diary entries; Munna's sections recall the picaresque style of *Q & A*; Eketi's sections attempt to render a consciousness untouched by modernity.

This structure enables what one critic terms the novel's "unique formalistic constructions of reader and narrator," which make "the social connotations inherent in Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects*... available" to readers. By distributing narrative authority across multiple consciousnesses, Swarup prevents any single perspective from dominating, forcing readers to hold multiple truths in tension.

5.2 The Whodunit and Its Subversion

Despite its framing as a murder mystery, the novel subverts the conventions of the whodunit. The identity of the killer is not revealed through detective work but emerges from the

intersecting narratives. More importantly, the resolution does not restore order or deliver justice in any meaningful sense. As the Guardian review notes, "Vicky Rai's murder is pinned on an innocent tribesman from the Andaman Islands" —a conclusion that hardly reassures readers that justice has been served.

This subversion of generic expectations is deliberate. By denying readers the satisfaction of a conventional resolution, Swarup insists that the real crimes—the systemic injustices that structure Indian society—cannot be resolved by identifying a single perpetrator. The murder of Vicky Rai is solved, but the murder of Ruby Gill remains unpunished, and the conditions that made both crimes possible remain unchanged.

5.3 Language and Voice

Swarup's linguistic range in *Six Suspects* exceeds that of his debut. The novel required research into multiple registers: "the Onge tribe in the Andaman Islands," "the modus operandi of mobile phone thieves," "Texan English" for the American character. This linguistic diversity reflects the novel's commitment to representing India's social diversity not just thematically but formally.

VI. CRITICAL RECEPTION AND DEBATES

6.1 The "Slumdog" Shadow

Six Suspects inevitably faced comparison to its predecessor, particularly after the enormous success of the *Slumdog Millionaire* film adaptation. Critics noted that the novel shares "many of that book's faults and strengths"—the "paper-thin" characters, the reliance on cliché, but also the "enjoyably propulsive" narrative momentum. The comparison was not always favorable; some found the second novel overambitious, attempting "to shove in everything Indian under the sun" without achieving the coherence of the first.

6.2 The Question of Depth

Some critics questioned the novel's depth, finding its characters insufficiently developed and its social critique too superficial. The Guardian review was particularly harsh, describing the novel as "sprawling" and "facetious," its attempts to incorporate current events making for "superficial, encyclopaedic reading". The same review criticized Swarup for avoiding politically sensitive topics like the Gujarat riots, suggesting that his diplomatic position constrained his critique.

Other readers found more value in the novel's panoramic vision. The Kirkus review praised its "teeming, beguiling Indian panorama" and its ability to bring "a hundred walk-on characters" to "vivid life". The AV Club review, while

acknowledging the novel's flaws, celebrated how Swarup "evokes India's over-the-top existence in the fashion of a Bollywood epic".

6.3 The Politics of Representation

The novel raises questions about representation that echo debates around *Q & A* and *Slumdog Millionaire*. Can an author from an elite background—Swarup is a diplomat, a member of the Indian Foreign Service—authentically represent the experiences of slum-dwellers, tribal people, and other marginalized communities? Does the novel's panoramic ambition risk reducing complex lives to types, serving them up for consumption by international readers?

Swarup himself addresses these questions in interviews, emphasizing his research process and his commitment to getting "under the skin" of characters unlike himself. He also notes his government's willingness to grant him "complete liberty to express myself in a literary work" as long as it is clear that "the views expressed do not represent the views of my government". This assertion of artistic freedom suggests that the novel should be judged on its own terms, not as an official representation of India.

VII. CONCLUSION

7.1 The Novel's Achievements

Six Suspects represents a significant achievement in contemporary Indian English fiction, using the conventions of crime fiction to stage a comprehensive examination of Indian society at the turn of the millennium. Its multi-narrative structure enables representation of a broader social spectrum than is typical in the genre, from tribal communities to Bollywood stars, from slum-dwellers to cabinet ministers. Its subversion of generic expectations—the postponement of resolution, the denial of conventional justice—forces readers to confront systemic rather than individual wrongdoing.

The novel's central insight—that crime and social inequality are inextricably linked, that the legal system criminalizes the poor while immunizing the rich—remains urgently relevant. As Hemavathy and Senthamarai note, the novel "criticises the economic disparity and social inequality in contemporary Indian society", offering a critique that extends beyond its specific setting to address broader questions of justice, power, and representation.

7.2 Limitations and Future Directions

The novel is not without limitations. Its ambition occasionally exceeds its execution, with some critics finding its characters insufficiently developed and its social critique too diffuse. The supernatural elements involving Gandhi's ghost strike some readers as incongruous and

preachy. The novel's avoidance of certain politically sensitive topics may reflect the constraints of its author's diplomatic position.

Future research might examine *Six Suspects* in comparative context, alongside other works of Indian crime fiction and alongside Swarup's own *Q & A*. The novel's representation of tribal communities, its treatment of gender, and its engagement with globalization all merit further analysis. Its adaptation potential—the novel has been optioned for film—raises questions about how its multi-narrative structure might translate to other media.

7.3 Final Reflections

Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects* offers readers a compelling journey through contemporary India's contradictions. It is at once a murder mystery and a social panorama, a work of entertainment and a work of critique. Its flaws—the occasional thinness of character, the unevenness of execution—are the flaws of ambition, the risks taken by a writer unwilling to repeat himself. Its achievements—the range of voices, the structural ingenuity, the moral seriousness—establish Swarup as a significant voice in Indian English fiction, one whose work deserves continued attention from readers and scholars alike.

As India continues to grapple with the inequalities and injustices the novel documents, *Six Suspects* remains relevant not only as literature but as social analysis. It reminds us that crime is never merely individual, that justice is never merely procedural, and that the stories we tell about murder are always also stories about the societies that make murder possible.

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